

Traces of History and radical Innovation: Paintings by Mariela Bisson

For well over a century the topography of New England and Eastern part of New York State attracted visual artists and gave rise to the first truly independent American art movement, The Hudson River School. In spite of the subsequent discovery of the magnificence of the West it still captivates artists and the natural beauty enthusiast alike.

Much of the attraction could be attributed to the dichotomy of expectations, based on a rather idealized vision of the Eastern states, and the hard facts on the ground. Here the quaint towns of Connecticut, pastures of Vermont or New Hampshire are abated by deep ravines, dense forests or hidden caves, often places of eminent danger. The character of the landscape is almost magically changing from the bucolic mood into a place raging wilderness in the matter of seconds.

Catskills, Adirondacks and Hudson Valley create indomitable painterly vistas of majestic open spaces, but also offer the dramatic views of isolated spaces, of unexpected hidden coves, gushing waterfall, and meandering brooks where unexpected stone formations interrupt the flow and where we are reminded of the nature untamed and in a constant motion. These mountain brooks, large or small, are plentiful and inspired countless paintings, poetry and musical compositions alike.

The famous Alfred Bierstadt painting *Mountain Brook*, 1863, is an exquisite example as is the work of his brothers Charles and Edward, photographers, who documented the same place in Franconia Notch in White Mountains in New Hampshire few years earlier – and also a lasting influence on images of Woodstock painter, Mariella Bisson.

This was this visual heritage that permeated places of her childhood and that had profound influence on her lifelong dedication to art.

Growing up in St. Johnsbury in Northern Vermont, in the family that valued arts and literature – Mariella’s father was a sculptor, her mother an English literature professor at a local college- the family rented the house from an eminent poet, Robert Frost. Mariella loved books from an earliest age and spend innumerable hours in the St. Johnsbury’s Athenaeum - a remarkable institution that served the towns population as library, social hub and an art gallery. It was where Mariella fell under the spell of the exceptional collection of 19th century landscape painting, amazed by Fairbanks brothers. She experienced magic of works by Sanford R. Gifford, Albert Bierstad, or Asher B. Durand – and it was than that she decided to become an artist.

She studied at the Pratt Institute and although she knew her true calling was painting she did not shy from getting involved in the Brooklyn artistic renaissance of the 1980. She became curator of stately but notoriously difficult spaces to install in the arch at the Grand Army plaza. The name of the gallery was appropriately called the Arch and their Mariella introduced young artist such as Florence Neal, Alison Saar, Nancy Azara or Fred Wilson along side luminaries such as Mel Edwards.

However Mariella’s love of painting prevailed and to find time and space to work she did seek artists residencies among them Byrdcliffe in Woodstock School of Art where she once again fell under the spell of the New England’s magnificent beauty and decided to relocate permanently to the area – a decision that allowed her artistic practice truly flourish. Mariella reached the stage when she can dedicate herself to her art full time with the astonishing results.

Mariella’s pieces develop from sketches, drawings and/or small watercolors, that she executes au plain air. Later in the

studio these are translated into larger works. In the initial field works she documents the colors, shapes, light and general composition of the place that captivates her. This initial factual composition might be slightly altered in the subsequent studio works to accentuate features the artist considers to be essential to convey not only the physical likeness but to capture the specific mood of as well. She contemplates the particulars of the locale that initially impressed her and seeks to develop a deeper spiritual attachment to the place. This partially conceptual approach where the imagination and feelings meet the reality is prevailing at this stage and the theoretical knowledge of art history and depth of practical training became evident. As every serious and dedicated artist Mariella is steeped in studies of the landscape painters of the past, be it European masters such as Cezanne, Canadian Group of Seven, Emil Carr or the Americans such as already mentioned Hudson River School painters, or 20th century masters Marsden Hartley, Milton Avery or Charles Burchfield among them.

The through knowledge of historical works builds a solid foundation for the independence of Mariella's approach. She ably transforms existing landscape features into images that symbolize the essence of the place, moving the observed reality into the embodiment of spiritual forces permeating the scene. While her primary techniques in large works is the combination of painting and collage it is time consuming and elaborate. Nevertheless it results in simplification of forms into more geometric elements that combined with the careful calibrating of light and shadows and the unexpected shifts in perspective, point to the unique approach to landscape painting. Here the artist masterfully weds the images of the observed reality with the growing ability to re - envision the existing elements in the new light moving the whole composition into the realm bordering on abstraction.

The Sound of the Trees, 2018, is the perfect example. There the boulders, tree trunks or powerful roots are solidified into bold geometric shapes that signify the reality as well an abstract idiom.

It is a result of the collage technique, that revolutionized 20th century art, that Mariella's now employs extensively that allows for the richness of her images

It profoundly changed Mariella's work, allowing her create textured surfaces that imply pictorial depth and bring intricate color schemes to the compositions. Sometimes sourced from her own older works on paper, supplemented by torn sheets of paper of various colors, Mariella modulates these paper shards as she would the brushstrokes. Once adhered to support and meeting the compositional needs these are over painted and more of the paper fragments might be applied. There were some technical issues that needed to be solved - attaching a paper layers to canvas, thick paper or wooden board presented a number of technical problems that had to be solved

Paper is a material intensely sensitive to changes in temperature and humidity and as it contracts it expands, it affects the underlying material of the painting's support . While the wood panels are more resilient to such fluctuation, they limit the size of the works and Mariella was searching for ways of applying the collage elements to canvas or linen to create "true" ,and larger, paintings. Both could be used effectively when stretched on a specially crafted frames, tailor made for made for her work.. That allows for all varied collaged and painted elements coexist in a perfect unity.

It was already mentioned that Bisson family lived in the house owed by poet Robert Frost. Many of his extraordinary poems celebrated the New England landscape with its peculiar mixture of dramatic ruggedness and poetic tranquility. Similar qualities, translated into visual terms, could be associated with Mariella's work. And sometimes the poems

inspire the painting's titles, when the words prompt the artist to envision their relationship to the observed segment of particular place. Already mentioned *The Sound of Trees*, depicts the tree trunk firmly rooted amongst the inhospitable terrain of rocks where the roots are like strong limbs holding it firmly in place. The invisible crown, however, is seemingly always swaying to and fro and is sounding the desire to move:

“They are that that talks of going
but never gets away;
and that talks no less for knowing,
as it grows wiser and older,
that now it means to stay.”

Is inspired by Frost's poem of the same title. 1

Married to the Brook, 2018, is another work that responds to Robert Frost's poem, *West Running Brook*. 2 It is a brook full of contraries finding its own way through the stony bed to reach an unknown, in fact unexpected, destination.

“We will both be married to the brook.
We will build a bridge across it, and the bridge shall be our arm
thrown over it asleep beside it”

Pearson's Falls, 2018, depicts a celebrated spot in North Carolina. Articulated strata of the rugged stone ledges and rushing waters of cascading waterfall are contrasted with the lace of the leaves, leading our eye toward the lighter areas and ultimately toward the patch of sky visible through the foliage. The artist vision prompts us to contemplate enhanced degree of reality, richer than the exact record of the existing elements . It is the artists' privilege to enrich the record of the observed with visual ideas that urges us to return to the new,

constructed image time and again, to discover ideas that seem at first to be hidden, revealing themselves only over the repeated encounters with the work. It is also Mariella Bisson's intention :

'When you stand up close, they fracture apart, as if you were looking at a kaleidoscope. I just hope there's more to see every time you look at it, just catch something a little different. I don't rush through them, I take my time, and I mean it's serious". 1

We should be equally serious while looking at Mariella's work. Hers is a view of reality that transcends the visible where the artist invites us to enter the world of imagination and beauty. We should wholeheartedly accept this generous invitation.

Charlotta Kotik
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1. Robert Frost

2. Robert Frost

1. [http://www.rollmagazine.com/2012 -NYFA- fellowship-in-painting-goes-to-woodstock -resident-mariella-bisson/](http://www.rollmagazine.com/2012-NYFA-fellowship-in-painting-goes-to-woodstock-resident-mariella-bisson/)
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